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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA IMMEDIATE 3740
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS IMMEDIATE 2523
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA IMMEDIATE 0696
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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 000956

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO REMOTE ARMY POST ON COLOMBIA BORDER

REF: QUITO 00953

Classified By: PolOff Jarahn Hillsman, Reasons 1.4 (b&d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador visited a remote Ecuadorian military post located in Puerto El Carmen, Sucumbios province, on April 23. While there, she discussed illegal armed group activity with Ecuadorian military officials, viewed USG funded military projects, and met with the beneficiaries of a USAID coffee processing project in a nearby town. The Ambassador's visit opened doors to military officials and local leaders, demonstrating continued USG support for development and security initiatives in the region. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador, accompanied by the MILGP Commander, DATT, PolMilOff, and Ecuadorian Military Joint Command Chief of Operations Major General Ernesto Gonzalez, flew from Quito on a USG C-12 to a remote oil field airstrip in Tarapoa, Sucumbios, in the Northeastern corner of Ecuador. She then traveled two hours by car, under heavy military escort, to the Army's 55th Battalion headquarters. The 55th's modest command post is located in the impoverished border town of Puerto El Carmen, at the confluence of the San Miguel and Putumayo rivers, directly across from Puerto Ospina, Colombia.

¶3. (SBU) The 55th Battalion is one of five Army units of the 19th Brigade, which is in turn under the 4th Division. The 19th Brigade is responsible for patrolling hundreds of miles of dense tropical rainforest that spans 200 miles of Ecuador's porous border with Colombia. The troops are charged with preventing irregular armed group activity, narcotics trafficking, white gas and other contraband smuggling, and protecting the country's oil fields. Numerous FARC base camps, training facilities, logistical support units, and sophisticated cocaine processing labs have been discovered by the 19th Brigade over the past year. The U.S. has provided approximately \$6.8 million in assistance to the 19th Brigade for equipment, fuel, rations, vehicles, and infrastructure projects in support of these efforts.

SECURITY: VISIT TO 19th Army Brigade

¶4. (C) The Ambassador's visit to the 55th Battalion began with a briefing by 4th Division Commander Major General Jorge Pena. Pena expressed GOE appreciation for USG military support, and lamented the negative impact of Colombia's

internal conflict on Ecuador. He said that irregular armed groups regularly enter Ecuador seeking rest and re-supply, and many hold (dubious) dual-national status. Pena said that the 19th Brigade conducts two major border sweeps a month, claiming that "no FARC camp can last longer than six months without being discovered by our forces." He lamented the lack of police presence, saying the military is the only government presence in the sector.

¶15. (C) Major General Gonzalez echoed Pena's concerns about the lack of broader government services in the region, expressing hope that President Correa's newly-unveiled "Plan Ecuador" (RefTel) would change that. Gonzalez said that U.S. support was much appreciated and was essential to continued operations of the 19th Brigade. The Ambassador commended the unit for progress made in restricting irregular armed group activity. She said the USG understood the challenges facing the Brigade and remained committed to supporting the Brigade's important work. The Ambassador encouraged cross-border communication with Colombian military authorities, citing the importance of mutual understanding.

DEVELOPMENT: Visit TO Coffee Processing Project

¶16. (U) The Ambassador visited a USAID-supported coffee processing facility in the town of Aguas Negras, also in Sucumbios province. Representatives of the local producers association, community leaders, and residents turned out in large numbers to meet the Ambassador, a rare event in this remote farming village. The Ambassador congratulated the cooperative for its initiative, noting the importance of generating licit income and opportunity in the historically neglected region. Cooperative leaders expressed their appreciation for U.S assistance and provided a tour of the facility, highlighting machinery purchased with USAID assistance. USAID support to acquire technology and strengthen management practices was critical to the cooperative's sustainability.

19th Brigade Captures FARC Leader During Visit

¶17. (U) 19th Brigade units conducting a monthly sweep captured seven suspected FARC members on April 23 in Sucumbios province, just a few kilometers from the sites the Ambassador visited. The seven are believed to be from the FARC's 48 Front, and were apprehended with two AK-47 rifles, one hand grenade, ammunition, and supplies. This sweep began on April 22 and coincided with the Ambassador's visit. Interestingly, Ecuador's first female graduates from the Tigre jungle training course took part in this success, which garnered considerable press coverage. The DCM and visiting DASD Steve Johnson congratulated the Minister of Defense on the successful operation during a courtesy call on April 26; the Minister (Ecuador's first female to hold the position) was clearly delighted with the success and the performance of the female combatants.

Comment

¶18. (C) With U.S. assistance and encouragement, Ecuadorian military units in the region have conducted frequent sweeps of the border area, with increasing success. Unfortunately, limited resources and equipment continue to inhibit even more aggressive action. We share local military official concern over the lack of greater GOE presence here, particularly by the police, and have encouraged National Police leadership to correct it. The Aguas Negras coffee project highlighted USG assistance providing licit opportunities to counter the drug trade--also essential to this region's future development.

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